

SERIES 1999-2000
CIRCULAR LETTER C-11

TO: Superintendents of Schools and
Elementary and Middle School Principals

FROM: Theodore S. Sergi
Commissioner of Education

DATE: February 9, 2000

SUBJECT: Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) Results

Attached is the CMT press release (2/2/2000), which provides critical information about the 1999 CMT statewide results. Connecticut students demonstrated significant improvement, continuing a trend of upward growth since 1993. In the sections "What Works" on page 7 and "Use of CMT Results" on page 11, schools and districts are asked to analyze student achievement over time and to examine student results by school, classroom, gender, race and ethnicity, and poverty. Students who are not mastering the achievement goals should be receiving new and different instruction.

CMT results have highlighted the benefits of early reading success. Therefore, we urge you to work with your preschool and kindergarten reading readiness programs to ensure alignment with your elementary curriculum. For your information, as part of last year's accountability legislation, priority school districts are now assessing students' reading development in Grades 1, 2 and 3, midyear and spring. The results of those locally administered assessments (the Developmental Reading Assessment – a 15-minute running record and interview per child) are used to identify and provide additional instructional support and time in an individualized reading plan.

As I am sure you are aware, use of the next generation of the CMT will begin in fall 2000. You have already received the *Mathematics Handbook*; the *Language Arts Handbook* will be distributed this month; and 12 workshops on the next generation are being offered throughout the state (see attached brochure). You will also receive more material on CMT III for use at the end of this school year, over the summer and early next year.

Also attached is a copy of my recent opinion piece in the Hartford Courant. I believe that we must be relentless in pursuing success for each child, but balanced in our use of and reliance on the CMT. We can do both.

If you have any questions on your CMT results, please contact Abigail L. Hughes, Associate Commissioner, Division of Evaluation and Research, at 860-566-2092 or abigail.hughes@po.state.ct.us
Thank you.

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Enclosures

Achievement Must Be Measured By More Than One Test

By Theodore S. Sergi

Connecticut's students this fall again demonstrated significant improvement on the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT), continuing a trend of upward growth since 1993. Our urban students, in particular, are achieving at a higher rate of growth than the state average.

Still, no one should be pleased with the current level of achievement, and everyone must be working toward faster student progress. We must reach every student.

The CMT has been praised nationally for its content and rigorous standards. It has helped improve teaching and learning and, as a result, Connecticut's students now achieve at the highest levels in the nation in reading, writing and math.

Connecticut's student testing program is about students acquiring skills. When we begin to move away from that focus in our reporting of scores, we detract from the purpose and value of the assessment program and send the wrong message to students, teachers and parents about what is important in education.

This is why we did not report this year a single-number index of CMT performance, introduced last year.

The intent of the index was to provide an additional picture of performance – along with all of the other measures we provide, including percentage of students achieving goal, average score and the percentage of students above remedial level on every test and at every grade level.

Unfortunately, the single-number index was used to rank school districts without detail of academic performance. The convenience of one simple list gave it undue and inappropriate prominence. The ranking distracts from the public's understanding of how students are performing in reading, writing and math.

In other words, the index does not focus on whether students have mastered essential skills, the statutory purpose.

In public education, the issues of focus and balance are critical. Other states have struggled through a backlash against their state testing program because of perceived imbalance, over-emphasis and misuse.

The use of any single score for ranking purposes:

- has no instructional value and fails to convey growth in achievement;
- combines nine different test scores – from 4th grade Math to 8th grade Writing, and eliminates the usefulness of the data;
- does not account for wide variability in districts' rates of special education and bilingual students or the test exemption rates;
- leads to over-interpretation of small differences;

A ranking of “first” or “last” suggests that there is one best way to measure the performance of a school district, a school and even a child. There is no one best measure of student performance on the CMT, and, furthermore, there are multiple measures of student achievement. We have an obligation to use all of them.

We must also keep in mind the many goals we have for our youth: good character, work ethic, ability to work with others, knowledge and skill in the arts, sciences, social sciences, languages, physical and mental health – and these are not measured on the CMT.

Is this a step back from our support for accountability, fair comparisons and healthy competition? Absolutely not. Accountability is best served by the use of more information, greater accuracy and more detail, not less.

The Department of Education advocates the reporting of numerous measures of specific student achievement. Multi-year CMT scores and other comprehensive and accurate data are available on the Internet, on computer disc, in book form, in the media and in the annual public reporting of the Strategic School Profiles by school and by district.

Parents receive an individualized CMT report on their child – providing information on specific skills mastered and those that are not.

This year’s statewide test results provide evidence of continuous growth and urban achievement, and validation of the needs for more early reading success in our big cities. These messages should not be lost or overshadowed by a ranking of our communities.

The students of the Hartford Public Schools should take great pride in the growth of their achievement this year. The actions of the Board of Trustees, the leadership of Superintendent Anthony Amato, the team effort of the teachers and administrators, an elevated level of parent and community support, extra hours of instruction and daily reading have all set a new environment for learning in Hartford.

In a society that has become fascinated with rankings and lists, one can understand the interest in such a number. However, the loss of focus on the purposes of the CMT and the imbalance that such a ranking creates far outweighs its value.

The receipt of test results should only be the beginning of the improvement process. Each local school district evaluates their data to identify necessary changes in curriculum and instruction.

Connecticut students should feel proud of their accomplishments; they and their teachers worked hard. The continuing challenges are to ensure that increasing numbers of students reach the state goals, and that the gaps in achievement are reduced over time.